

OPENING STATEMENT BY REP. JOHN BOEHNER, CHAIRMAN
EDUCATION & THE WORKFORCE COMMITTEE
MARKUP OF FAMILY EDUCATION REIMBURSEMENT ACT
WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2005

After Hurricanes Katrina and Rita tore through the Gulf Coast, it became clear that we were facing challenges like never before. More than 300,000 students were displaced, forced from their homes, their schools, and their communities. An important part of what we're doing here today is to provide meaningful relief to the students and families affected by the storms.

Of particular concern are the students who have been displaced from their schools and re-enrolled in other schools all across the country. Public, private, and charter schools have all risen to the challenge, opening their doors and welcoming displaced students as their own. These schools know that education is critical, and they know that we cannot allow these students to go without an education simply because they're away from their homes.

To assist the schools that have enrolled displaced students, we've offered an innovative proposal to create Family Education Reimbursement Accounts for the duration of this school year. This is a one-year program that offers unprecedented relief in response to an unprecedented natural disaster. These accounts would be used to provide reimbursement for educational costs to the schools that are enrolling these children. Rather than forcing families and schools to navigate existing bureaucracies, we want to harness the power of technology to provide direct assistance on behalf of individual students.

The education reimbursement plan is hinged on simplicity for families and simplicity for schools. Affected individuals and communities don't need another layer of confusion or uncertainty, and they don't need to wait for funds to filter through the three layers of federal, state, and local bureaucracy. What these schools need is a simple, straightforward plan to receive reimbursement on behalf of every child they have enrolled, for the period each child is in school.

In the last several weeks, a bipartisan consensus has emerged to ensure that public, private, and charter schools are all fully included in the hurricane relief effort. The hurricanes did not distinguish between public and private schools or students, and neither should the assistance that Congress provides them. The storms did not discriminate in which schools were flooded or destroyed, which communities were uprooted, or which families and students were displaced.

Parents enrolled their children in whatever schools were willing to open their doors. These schools didn't ask questions – they offered refuge to students in need. We need to provide the same relief on behalf of all the schools that are educating these children.

The *Washington Post* yesterday editorialized, "In an unusual display of timeliness, both the House and Senate education committees have produced pragmatic legislation offering federal funding for the education of children displaced by Hurricane Katrina. Both bills would link concrete sums directly to individual children. Both systems are temporary, ending after this school year. And both would allow what has generally been taboo: providing federal money to private as well as public schools."

While important differences remain between the various relief proposals, I believe the question is not *if* public, private, and charter schools will all receive the same relief – the question is simply *how*.

By offering education reimbursement accounts, we can empower families in the relief effort and ensure federal funds are targeted to meet the needs of students and the schools that have enrolled them. We must be willing to look beyond the status quo to offer assistance to those in need.

While the cost of this proposal will ultimately depend on the number of students who are enrolled and the length of time they remain in school, it could reach up to \$2.5 billion and, through savings generated through our reconciliation packages today, we will pay for this critical measure. Importantly, when the current school year is complete, any unused balances will be credited back to the federal government. This will ensure resources are available throughout the school year for families, while taxpayer dollars are accounted for at the program's close.

I am encouraged that so many Members of Congress have taken a personal interest in providing this type of education relief, and I urge my colleagues to support this proposal so we can move forward on behalf of students, families, communities, and schools.